Chief FOIA Officer Report

March 2025

U.S. DEPARTMENT *of* STATE

Contents

Summary

The Department of State (the "Department") is responsible for formulating and executing the foreign policy of the United States and maintains records dealing with U.S. foreign relations as well as those relating to the programs and activities that support this mission. The Department's mission is global in nature as are the records that document that mission. As such, the Department maintains its records at dozens of locations domestically and at hundreds of posts located around the globe.

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests received by the Department are often a mixture of complex subject matters regarding foreign government relations, diplomacy, terrorism, armed conflicts, and security; they can require searches of the Department's many domestic offices and more than 270 diplomatic missions worldwide. For many of these requests, searches locate voluminous amounts of records, often containing highly classified or otherwise sensitive information that must be reviewed by subject matter experts within the Department as well as other U.S. Government agencies or consultation with foreign governments before any information can be released to the requester. These reviews are required to determine whether the release of the information could harm U.S. national security, damage relations with foreign governments, or reveal other sensitive information.

The Department makes every effort to respond to FOIA requests within the statutory response period. To implement its statutory responsibilities under the FOIA, the Department has established a centralized and comprehensive FOIA program, in which a single office, the Information Access Programs Directorate (A/SKS/IAP), receives and coordinates the processing of the majority of the FOIA requests made to the Department. Only two other offices, the Law Enforcement Liaison Division within the Directorate of Passport Services and the Office of Inspector General, are authorized to accept FOIA requests submitted to the Department. However, the processing of most first-party requests may be tasked to a decentralized component of the Department for a direct reply to the requester.

During this reporting period (March 2024 to March 2025), the Department continued its efforts to build its FOIA program to decrease the FOIA backlog and keep up with incoming requests.

In 2024, the Department's FOIA program continued to undergo changes, including a reorganization, deployment of a new internal "FOIA Dashboard," increased staffing, new training efforts, updated workflows, amplified proactive disclosures, use of emerging technologies, and completed the relocation of case processing operations to Charleston, South Carolina.

In October 2024, the Bureau of Administration underwent a comprehensive reorganization and modernization effort, resulting in the establishment of Shared Knowledge Services (A/SKS) to serve as the Department's lead on information access and information governance and support its global workforce with the right information and knowledge to empower its

diplomatic mission and promote transparency. A/SKS has two managing directorates: first, the Information Access Programs Directorate (A/SKS/IAP) oversees and implements the Department's information access programs, including FOIA, and serves as the primary point of contact for anyone seeking access to Department records. Second, the Privacy, Policy, and Knowledge Management Directorate (A/SKS/PPKM) manages organizational policies and information governance programs, including privacy compliance program, enterprise records management, knowledge management, and the Ralph J. Bunche Library. This reorganization effort underscored the complexity and interconnectedness of daily operations within the Department's information access programs. For the FOIA program, these changes are intended to enhance the Department's management and responsiveness to FOIA and Privacy Act requests, ensuring more efficient resource allocation and enhanced program performance.

In 2024, the Department launched a "FOIA Dashboard" to track in near real-time key FOIA performance indicators from FY 2019 through FY 2025. The dynamic Power BI visualizations provide FOIA professionals and leadership with insights into case processing workloads, including the number of new requests received, requests processed, the current state of the backlog, statistics on web postings, and other key metrics such as the status of the 10 oldest pending FOIA requests and consultations. The Dashboard offers users the ability to delve into specific workgroups and features forecasting tools that enable supervisors to analyze trends, project future demands and workloads, and gain a comprehensive understanding of the overall landscape of pending FOIA requests. The tool is accessible to anyone on the Department's internal information technology network.

In 2024, the Department filled multiple FOIA positions, including by expanding use of Pathways Internships and Pathways Recent Graduates programs. The Department also expanded its staff working on FOIA appeals and litigation, adding one GS-12 and two GS-09 Government Information Specialists.

During the reporting period, the Department regularly evaluated its case processing workflows to increase its case closure rate. The Department increased communications with requesters, including on the scope their requests; proactively released records to reduce the number of FOIA requests received; prioritized the closure of the oldest requests; and explored the use of new technology (including AI tools and automation) to identify and process similar requests, manage workflow, and process documents.

The Department continued to recognize the need for FOIA training for its full-time FOIA professionals and updated and expanded the training programs initiated in 2023. The FOIA Case Processing Office conducted two comprehensive, 6-week in-person training sessions for its new FOIA case processing staff. This training included sessions on the history and structure of the FOIA, the intake process, interpreting requests, conducting reasonable searches, working with Classified National Security Information (Executive Order 13526), applying FOIA exemptions, processing consultations and referrals, FOIA/Privacy Act interface, appeals and litigation considerations, and records management. The training also included

table-top exercises, instruction on the use of FOIAXpress, and resources available to further the employees' professional growth and development. Sessions leveraged multiple subject matter experts within the Department, IAP, and the FOIA Case Processing Office. Sixteen new analysts attended the two training sessions. Additionally, the FOIA Case Processing Office received training from the National Archives and Records Administration's Office of Government Information Services (OGIS). OGIS trained FOIA Case Processing staff on their role as FOIA Ombudsman and how to interact with FOIA requesters. The training included role-play scenarios to help staff better understand the needs of requesters, leading to more positive customer experience outcomes for both the requester and the Department.

During the year, Government Information Specialists working on FOIA appeals and litigation were afforded the opportunity to attend monthly Q&A sessions on FOIAXpress (the Department's FOIA case management and document review platform) and eRecords (the Department's central repository for storing permanent electronic records), to develop more efficient searches and means to review responsive records. In April 2024, the Department also provided a specialized training on how to prepare *Vaughn* Indices. This training included an overview of the importance of a *Vaughn* Index in a litigation as well step-by-step guidance on preparing a *Vaughn* Index. To improve collaboration and establish guidance, a rotating working group consisting of analysts, reviewers, and attorney-advisers was formed and tackled topics such as roles and responsibilities, standard operating procedures, and third agency consultations.

The Department also continued to partner with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to learn about each other's processes and best practices. In January 2025, the FOIA Case Processing Office in Charleston, South Carolina met with their counterparts in the FBI's Savannah, Georgia Field Office to discuss best process for case processing and use of technology.

The Department continued its "release to one, release to all" approach to posting documents to its FOIA Library. In FY 2024, the Department posted an additional 125,434 records to its FOIA Library, making a total of 426,268 records available to the public through the Department's transparency programs at the end of FY 2024. In August 2024, the Department began posting to its FOIA Library documents that were released under the FOIA between 1979 and 1996, which were previously available only on microfiche. These newly digitized documents can now be accessed by the public on the U.S. Department of State Microfiche Documents webpage. The Department also continued releasing declassified cables from 1997 to its FOIA Library that had been reviewed with the assistance of a machine learning technology. The Department will continue to post declassified cables online in advance of any public request as part of its monthly "release to one, release to all" FOIA posting.

The Department's FOIA litigation demands continued to be considerable. In FY 2024 the Department was named as a defendant in 82 new FOIA litigations, closed approximately 60 litigation cases consisting of 97 FOIA requests, and ended the fiscal year with approximately 220 total FOIA litigations involving 373 unique FOIA requests. Most cases are filed against

the Department for failure to respond within the statutory time limits. While FOIA requests in litigation comprise only about 1% of all FOIA requests at the Department, they demand a disproportionate share—approximately 90%—of the FOIA reviewer resources, which has contributed to the increase in the FOIA backlog.

In summary, the Department's FOIA program continues to pursue innovative ways to address the increasing quantity of requests involving larger volumes of electronic and other records. The Department remains dedicated to improving its ability to process FOIA requests, enhancing the timeliness of its responses to the public, and examining different uses of technology for benefits throughout the entire FOIA process. Additionally, the Department continues to promote transparency and provide information to the public through its online presence and by posting documents released under the FOIA to the public FOIA website. Feedback is welcome and can be provided at FOIA Feedback Page.

Name and Title of your Agency's Chief FOIA Officer

Mark J. Biedlingmaier
Acting Assistant Secretary
Bureau of Administration
U.S. Department of State

Section I: FOIA Leadership and Applying the Presumption of Openness

The guiding principle underlying the Attorney General's 2022 FOIA Guidelines is the presumption of openness. The Guidelines also highlight the importance of agency leadership in ensuring effective FOIA administration. Please answer the following questions about FOIA leadership at your agency and describe the steps your agency has taken to ensure that the presumption of openness is being applied to all decisions involving the FOIA.

A. Leadership Support for FOIA

1. The FOIA requires each agency to designate a Chief FOIA Officer who is a senior official at least at the Assistant Secretary or equivalent level. See 5 U.S.C. § 552(j)(1) (2018). Is your agency's Chief FOIA Officer at or above this level?

   Yes

2. Please provide the name and title of your agency's Chief FOIA Officer.

   Mark J. Biedlingmaier
   Acting Assistant Secretary
   Bureau of Administration
   U.S. Department of State

3. What steps has your agency taken to incorporate FOIA into its core mission? For example, has your agency incorporated FOIA milestones into its strategic plan?

   One of the primary goals of Bureau of Administration is to manage the Department's information as a strategic asset to improve knowledge management, data-driven decision making, and transparency by adapting to evolving customer needs using new technology and modernized ways of conducting business. To achieve this goal, the Department continues to explore the use of new technology, such as machine learning and artificial intelligence, to provide more timely responses to FOIA and other information requests and new ways to proactively disclose information to the public to increase overall agency transparency.

Each year, all agency personnel with access to the Department's unclassified network are required to take mandatory records management training, which includes a module on the FOIA. Failure to take and pass this training results in a denial of access to the network. The goal of the course is to train all personnel to identify federal records, manage records, understand the records management lifecycle, and recognize that FOIA is every employee's responsibility.
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B. Presumption of Openness

4. The Attorney General's 2022 FOIA Guidelines provide that "agencies should confirm in response letters to FOIA requesters that they have considered the foreseeable harm standard when reviewing records and applying FOIA exemptions." Does your agency provide such confirmation in its response letters?

   Yes, the Department provides language in its FOIA response letters confirming that it has considered the foreseeable harm standard when reviewing records and applying FOIA exemptions.

5. In some circumstances, agencies may respond to a requester that it can neither confirm nor deny the existence of requested records if acknowledging the existence of records would harm an interested protected by a FOIA exemption. This is commonly referred to as a Glomar response. If your agency tracks *Glomar* responses, please provide:
   - the number of times your agency issued a full or partial *Glomar* response during Fiscal Year (FY) 2024 (separate full and partial if possible);
   - the number of times a *Glomar* response was issued by exemption during FY 2024 (e.g., Exemption 7(C) – 20 times, Exemption 1 – 5 times).

   N/A

6. Optional — If there are any other initiatives undertaken by your agency to ensure that the presumption of openness is being applied, please describe them here.

   In 2024, the Department continued its "release to one, release to all" policy of posting released documents to its FOIA Library. In August 2024, the Department began posting to its FOIA Library documents that were released under the FOIA between 1979 and 1996, which were previously available only on microfiche. These newly digitized documents can now be accessed by the public via U.S. Department of State Microfiche Documents webpage. The Department also continued to release declassified cables from 1997 to its FOIA Library that had been reviewed with the assistance of a machine learning technology. The Department will continue to post declassified cables online in advance of any public request as part of its monthly "release to one, release to all" FOIA posting.

In FY 2024, the Department posted an additional 125,434 records to its FOIA Library, making a total of 371,370 records available to the public through the Department's transparency programs at the end of FY 2024.

Section II: Ensuring Fair and Effective FOIA Administration

The Attorney General's 2022 FOIA Guidelines provide that "[e]nsuring fair and effective FOIA administration requires . . . proper training, and a full understanding of FOIA obligations by the entire agency workforce." The Guidelines reinforce longstanding guidance to "work with FOIA requesters in a spirit of cooperation." The Attorney General also "urge[s] agency Chief FOIA Officers to undertake comprehensive review of all aspects of their agency's FOIA administration" as part of ensuring fair and effective FOIA administration.

A. FOIA Training

1. The FOIA directs agency Chief FOIA Officers to ensure that FOIA training is offered to agency personnel. See 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(j)(2)(F). Please describe the efforts your agency has undertaken to ensure proper FOIA training is made available and used by agency personnel.

   The Department has mandatory records management training that all users of the Department's unclassified network must complete. This online records training has a FOIA module that explains the purpose of the FOIA and each employee's responsibilities under the FOIA. In FY 2024, 131,287 users on the Department's unclassified network completed training, a 3% increase from FY 2023. Failure to complete this training results in loss of access to the unclassified network. In 2023, this training was updated to include expanded content on the FOIA, including employee obligations for promptly responding to taskers and conducting searches for responsive records.

   The FOIA Case Processing Office conducted two comprehensive, 6-week in-person training sessions for its new FOIA case processing staff. This training included sessions on the history and structure of the FOIA, the intake process, interpreting requests, conducting reasonable searches, working with Classified National Security Information (Executive Order 13526), applying FOIA exemptions and exclusions, processing consultations and referrals, FOIA/Privacy Act interface, appeals and litigation considerations, and records management. The training also included table-top exercises, instruction on the use of FOIAXpress, and available resources to further the employees' professional growth and development. Sessions leveraged multiple subject matter experts within the Department, IAP, and the FOIA Case Processing Office. Sixteen new analysts attended the two training sessions. Additionally, the FOIA Case Processing Office received training from the National Archives and Records Administration's Office of Government Information Services (OGIS). OGIS trained FOIA Case Processing staff on their role as FOIA ombudsman and how to interact with FOIA requesters. The training included role-play scenarios to help staff

better understand the needs of requesters, leading to more positive customer experience outcomes for both the requester and the Department.

Throughout the year, Government Information Specialists working FOIA appeals and litigation were afforded the opportunity to attend monthly Q&A sessions on FOIAXpress (the Department's FOIA case management and document review platform) and eRecords (the Department's central repository for storing permanent electronic records), to develop more efficient searches and means to review responsive records. In April 2024, the Department also provided a specialized training on how to prepare *Vaughn* Indices. This training included an overview of the importance of a *Vaughn* Index in a litigation as well step-by-step guidance on preparing a *Vaughn* Index. To improve collaboration and establish guidance, a rotating working group consisting of analysts, reviewers, and attorney-advisers was formed and tackled topics such as roles and responsibilities, standard operating procedures, and third agency consultations.

2. Did your FOIA professionals or the personnel at your agency who have FOIA responsibilities attend substantive FOIA training during the reporting period such as that provided by the Department of Justice?

   Yes

3. If yes, please provide a brief description of the type of training attended or conducted and the topics covered.

   In addition to the training described above, the Department's FOIA Public Liaison, along with other FOIA subject matter experts, conducted briefings for Department employees outside of the central FOIA office working on the FOIA. These briefings contained reminders about annual training requirements for classified and privacy information; updates on efforts to implement records management mandates that may affect the FOIA; a review of efforts to address existing FOIA processing issues; an update on efforts to increase postings to the FOIA website; and ongoing conversations about the processing priorities, including expedited requests.

   The FOIA Public Liaison also participated in the annual FOIA training provided by the Executive Secretariat Staff to officials in Offices of the Secretary, Deputy Secretaries, Counselor, Under Secretaries, and other bureaus and offices that report to the Secretary of State. The training provided information on the history and purpose of the FOIA, procedural requirements, conducting reasonable searches, FOIA exemptions, and release responsive documents to the public.

   The FOIA Public Liaison also held bi-monthly meetings with FOIA professionals in the Department's decentralized FOIA offices. These meetings covered a variety of topics related

to FOIA processing, including intake, tasking, conducting reasonable searches, review, backlog reduction efforts, FOIAXpress, and annual reporting requirements.

In FY 2024, 131,287 Department employees also completed a mandatory online records training that had a module explaining each employee's responsibilities under the FOIA. The FOIA Office leadership also continued to encourage FOIA staff to attend briefings and trainings provided by the American Society of Access Professionals (ASAP), the Department of Justice's (DOJ) Office of Information and Policy (OIP), and the Office of Government and Information Services (OGIS) at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, DC.

4. Please provide an estimate of the percentage of your FOIA professionals and staff with FOIA responsibilities who attended substantive FOIA training during this reporting period.

Over 90% of the Department's FOIA professionals attended substantive FOIA training during this reporting period.

5. OIP has directed agencies to "take steps to ensure that all of their FOIA professionals attend substantive FOIA training at least once throughout the year." If your response to the previous question is that less than 80% of your FOIA professionals attended training, please explain your agency's plan to ensure that all FOIA professionals receive or attend substantive FOIA training during the next reporting year.

N/A

6. Describe any efforts your agency has undertaken to inform non-FOIA professionals of their obligations under the FOIA. In particular, please describe how often and in what formats your agency provides FOIA training or briefings to non-FOIA staff; and if senior leaders at your agency received a briefing on your agency's FOIA resources, obligations and expectations during the FOIA process?

All agency personnel with access to the Department's unclassified network are required to take mandatory records management training each calendar year. This online records training has a FOIA module that explains the purpose of the FOIA and each employee's responsibilities under the FOIA. Failure to take and pass this training results in a denial of access to the network. In FY 2024, 131,287 Department personnel competed this training.

Senior Department leadership are regularly updated on the Department's FOIA resources, FOIA case processing statistics, and backlog reduction efforts. These updates include near real time reporting of key FOIA statistics via the FOIA Dashboard to the Deputy Assistant Secretary overseeing the FOIA Office and in-person briefings on FOIA staffing, current FOIA statistics, backlog reduction, IT efforts, and future planning.

B. Outreach

7. As part of the standard request process, do your FOIA professionals proactively contact requesters concerning complex or voluminous requests in an effort to clarify or narrow the scope of the request so requesters can receive responses more quickly? Please describe any such outreach or dialogue and, if applicable, any specific examples.

   Yes, the Department proactively contacts requesters to clarify the scope of a request so that it can be perfected. The Department has also established a process for identifying requests where the records may be reasonably described but will potentially be voluminous—for example, requests that use expansive relational terms, such as those that seek all records that "relate to" or "refer to" or "pertain to" or "concern" or "regarding" a particular subject. Intake analysts will reach out to the requester by email or phone to clarify and/or narrow the scope of the request. Sample language may also be provided to the requester to help them better describe the records they are seeking.

8. Outside of the standard request process or routine FOIA Liaison or FOIA Requester Service Center interactions, did your FOIA professionals engage in any outreach or dialogue, with the requester community or open government groups regarding your administration of the FOIA? For example, did you proactively contact frequent requesters, host FOIA-related conference calls with open government groups, or provide FOIA training to members of the public? Please describe any such outreach or dialogue and, if applicable, any specific examples of how this dialogue has led to improvements in your agency's FOIA administration.

   Yes. The Department's FOIA Public Liaison attended American Society of Access Professionals events, which provide opportunities to interact with the requester community. The Deputy Assistant Secretary for Shared Knowledge Services delivered a public presentation to the Public Interest Declassification Board (PIDB). The PIDB is an advisory committee established by the United States Congress with the official mandate of promoting the fullest possible public access to a thorough, accurate, and reliable documentary record of significant U.S. national security decisions and activities. The PIDB presentation focused on projects using artificial intelligence (AI) applications for modernizing declassification and Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) processing. A summary and video of that event can be found by clicking this link. The Director of the FOIA Case Processing Office chairs the Chief FOIA Officer Council's Committee on Cross-Agency Collaboration and Innovation (COCACI)/ Resources subcommittee, which identifies opportunities for standardization of a variety of resources that should be made available to FOIA offices to increase efficiency and ease of use across government agencies, especially smaller FOIA Requester Service Centers. In 2024, COCACI began work constructing a reference library for FOIA professionals.

9. The FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 requires additional notification to requesters about the services provided by the agency's FOIA Public Liaison. Please provide an estimate of the number of times requesters sought assistance from your agency's FOIA Public Liaison

during Fiscal Year 2024 (please provide a total number or an estimate of the number for the agency overall).

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C. Other Initiatives

10. Has your agency evaluated the allocation of agency personnel resources needed to respond to current and anticipated FOIA demands? If so, please describe what changes your agency has or will implement.

In October 2024, the Bureau of Administration underwent a comprehensive reorganization and modernization effort, resulting in the establishment of Shared Knowledge Services (A/SKS) to serve as the Department's lead on information access and information governance and support its global workforce with the right information and knowledge to empower its diplomatic mission and promote transparency. A/SKS has two managing directorates: first, the Information Access Programs Directorate (A/SKS/IAP) oversees and implements the Department's information access programs, including FOIA, and serves as the primary point of contact for anyone seeking access to Department records. Second, the Privacy, Policy, and Knowledge Management Directorate (A/SKS/PPKM) manages organizational policies and information governance programs, including privacy compliance program, enterprise records management, knowledge management, and the Ralph J. Bunche Library. This reorganization effort underscored the complexity and interconnectedness of daily operations within the Department's information access programs. For the FOIA program, these changes are intended to enhance the Department's management and responsiveness to FOIA and Privacy Act requests, ensuring more efficient resource allocation and enhanced program performance. As part of the broader effort the Department's FOIA office reviewed its staffing structure and workflows to identify resources needed to decrease its FOIA backlog and keep up with the current and anticipated FOIA demands by organizing its FOIA Case Processing staff into specialized teams.

To keep up with the demands of appeals and litigation, the Department reorganized the staff from one branch into four separate teams, resulting in the establishment of four supervisory government information specialist positions and four team lead positions. Litigation cases are assigned to each team based on subject matter and/or geographic region, allowing staff to gain expertise in a specific area, resulting in more efficient searches and reviews of responsive records.

Lastly, the Department will implement an updated backlog reduction/FOIA workplan for FY 2026-2029.

11. How does your agency use data or processing metrics to ensure efficient management of your FOIA workload? For example, case management reports, staff processing

statistics, etc. In addition, please specifically highlight any data analysis methods or technologies used.

The Department uses a FOIA Dashboard that is updated weekly to track the number of FOIA requests pending, received, and processed, including the status of the 10 oldest pending FOIA requests and consultations. These numbers can be refined by Department component, queue, and case processing stage to better identify bottlenecks and where the office should direct its resources to enhance case closure rates. The data is also presented in a visual format making it easier for the user to understand and see changes overtime.

12. The federal [FOIA Advisory Committee](#), comprised of agency representatives and members of the public, was created to foster dialogue between agencies and the requester community, solicit public comments, and develop recommendations for improving FOIA administration. Since 2020, the FOIA Advisory Committee has issued a number of [recommendations](#). Please answer the below questions:
   • Is your agency familiar with the FOIA Advisory Committee and its recommendations?
   • Has your agency implemented any of its recommendations or found them to be helpful? If so, which ones?

Yes, the Department of State is familiar with the FOIA Advisory Committee and its recommendations. The Department has implemented or found useful several of these recommendations, including: providing access to FOIA-released records in its FOIA Library through the Department's "release to one, release to all" policy; proactively offering requesters the opportunity to discuss their request with a Department FOIA representative; providing access to the Department's records disposition schedules and FOIA handbook on its FOIA website; sharing information with other agencies regarding the Department's use of artificial intelligence and machine learning to speed the declassification review of historical Department of State cables; exploring the use of artificial intelligence and machine learning to improve FOIA searches and process FOIA requests; and exploring the use of e-discovery tools to assist the Department in its searches of electronic records in response to FOIA requests.

13. Optional -- If there are any other initiatives undertaken by your agency to ensure fair and effective FOIA administration, please describe them here.

The Information Access Programs Directorate (IAP) regularly interacts with employees throughout the Department regarding FOIA issues. It also provides training regarding employees' FOIA responsibilities and any changes to the Department's policies implementing the FOIA. Department personnel have access to individualized FOIA briefings conducted by the FOIA Public Liaison. IAP also maintains an internal website where Department employees can view and download guidance on the FOIA. The Department briefs incoming officials on their records, classification, and FOIA responsibilities. The Department also briefs outgoing officials and reminds them, in writing

and in individual briefings, of their responsibilities to complete any outstanding FOIA searches before departure and to preserve their records so that they can be searched in the future.

The Department continued its policy of "release to one, release to all" during this reporting period through a series of regular postings made to the public FOIA website (https://foia.state.gov) of records released in FOIA cases, excluding any Privacy Act or first-person requests involving privacy information, and declassified historical cables. In FY 2024, the Department posted an additional 125,434 records to its FOIA Library, making a total of 371,370 records available to the public through the Department's transparency programs at the end of FY 2024.

Section III: Proactive Disclosures

The Attorney General's 2022 FOIA Guidelines emphasize that "proactive disclosure of information is . . . fundamental to the faithful application of the FOIA." The Guidelines direct agencies to post "records online quickly and systematically in advance of any public request" and reiterate that agencies should post records "in the most useful, searchable, and open formats possible."

1. Please describe what steps your agency takes to identify, track, and post (a)(2) proactive disclosures.

   The Department continued its "release to one, release to all" approach to posting FOIA documents online, which it did throughout the reporting period. Except for first-person requests (i.e., those involving privacy or personally identifiable information), the Department endeavors to post on its FOIA website those documents released to the public in the previous month. In August 2024, the Department began posting to its FOIA Library documents that were released under the FOIA between 1979 and 1996, which were previously available only on microfiche. These newly digitized documents can now be accessed by the public on the U.S. Department of State Microfiche Documents webpage. The Department also continued releasing declassified cables from 1997 to its FOIA Library that had been reviewed with the assistance of a machine learning technology. Cables released to date can be accessed at the FOIA Library's Search Released Documents page.

2. Does your agency post logs of its FOIA requests?
   • If so, what information is contained in the logs?
   • Are they posted in CSV format? If not, what format are they posted in?
   • Please provide a link to the page where any FOIA logs are posted. If applicable, please provide component links.

Yes, the Department posts logs of its FOIA requests. The logs contain the FOIA case number, name of requester, name of requester's organization, description of the request, date the request was received, and the date the request was closed. The FOIA logs are posted as PDFs and can be found here.

3. Provide examples of any material (with links) that your agency has proactively disclosed during the past reporting year, including records that have been requested and released three or more times in accordance with 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(2)(D).

   As described above, the Department makes monthly postings of records released in response to both FOIA and FOIA litigation cases as part of its "release to one, release to all policy." These documents may be found by searching the Department's FOIA Library. This approach allows the public to access thousands of documents that would otherwise only be available to individual requesters. In August 2024, the Department began posting to its FOIA Library documents that were released under the FOIA between 1979 and 1996, which were previously available only on microfiche. These newly digitized documents can now be accessed by the public on the U.S. Department of State Microfiche Documents webpage. The Department also continued releasing declassified cables from 1997 to its FOIA Library that had been reviewed with the assistance of a machine learning technology. The Department will continue to post declassified cables online in advance of any public request as part of its monthly "release to one, release to all" FOIA posting.

   The Department regularly publishes reports and other information on its public website. A few examples include the Department's annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, the annual Trafficking in Persons Report, and the annual Digest of United States Practice in International Law. The Office of the Historian maintains a public website that provides in-depth information to the public on the history of U.S. foreign policy. In addition to a full-text archive of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, the website includes valuable encyclopedic content on the history of U.S. relations with states around the world and a database of the Department's Principal Officers and Chiefs of Mission.

4. Please provide a link (or component links, if applicable) where your agency routinely posts its frequently requested records.

   https://foia.state.gov/FOIALIBRARY/SearchResults.aspx

5. Beyond posting new material, is your agency taking steps to make the posted information more useful to the public, especially to the community of individuals who regularly access your agency's website? If yes, please provide examples of such improvements, such as steps taken to post information in open and machine readable formats. If not taking steps to make posted information more useful, please explain why.

Yes, the Department continues to ensure that any material posted to the FOIA website is searchable by the public, not just posted online. The Department also works to group certain web postings together to make it easier for the public to find records that have been posted online.

The Department is currently in the process of evaluating options to redesign its FOIA Library with the goal of making it easier to find records and ensuring adherence to plain language guidelines. This evaluation includes the potential replacement of the current FOIA Library search engine to provide machine readable and actionable data which is a limitation of the current software.

6. Does your proactive disclosure process or system involve any collaboration with agency staff outside the FOIA office, such as IT or data personnel? If so, describe this interaction.

Yes, the Department continued its collaboration with the Office of Management Strategy and Solutions (M/SS) Center for Analytics, led by the Department's Chief Data and Artificial Intelligence Officer, to pilot machine learning software that accelerated the declassification review decisions for the previously mentioned cables that are now being systematically posted to its FOIA Library.

7. Optional -- Please describe the best practices used to improve proactive disclosures and any challenges your agency faces in this area.

The Department is using its available resources to post online as many documents as possible each month. Beginning in calendar year 2017, nearly all documents released under the FOIA are posted on the FOIA website, except for documents responsive to certain Privacy Act and first-person requests as well as in a few other instances. The preponderance of information released through the Department's FOIA process is now posted online within 1 to 3 months of the release of that information to the public. This approach exceeds the requirement to post records that have been or are likely to be requested three or more times. It is part of a strategy to use the website to promote transparency and to avoid duplicative requests in the future.

As described above, the Department is also proactively disclosing historical, declassified cables to its FOIA Library. This initiative provides the public with access to cables that document the conduct of U.S. foreign relations by the Department of State and U.S. diplomatic and consular representatives overseas and at U.S. missions to international organizations in advance of the material being available through traditional Federal Records Act processes at the National Archives and Records Administration.

Section IV: Steps Take to Greater Utilize Technology

A key component of FOIA administration is using technology to make information available to the public and to gain efficiency in FOIA processing. The Attorney General's 2022 [FOIA Guidelines](#) emphasize the importance of making FOIA websites easily navigable and complying with the [FOIA.gov](#) interoperability requirements. Please answer the following questions to describe how your agency is using technology to improve its FOIA administration and the public's access to information.

1. Has your agency reviewed its FOIA-related technological capabilities to identify resources needed to respond to current and anticipated FOIA demands?

   Yes

2. Please briefly describe any new types of technology your agency uses to support your FOIA program.

   The Department concluded an AI pilot which focused on matching already released records in its FOIA Library and similar cases in FOIAXpress. FOIA analysts are continuing to collaborate with the Center for Analytics team to provide feedback and refine the technology.

   The Department continues to explore ways to automate processes and increase FOIA productivity. For example, when a single FOIA requester used technology to submit 500 requests in just a few minutes, the Department was able to use bulk correspondence in its case tracking system to issue acknowledgements and update the case notes for all 500 requests.

3. Does your agency currently use any technology to automate record processing? For example, does your agency use machine learning, predictive coding, technology assisted review or similar tools to conduct searches or make redactions? If so, please describe and, if possible, estimate how much time and financial resources are saved since implementing the technology.

   Yes, the Department's eRecords Archive leverages machine learning to tag emails as "personal" or as "news clippings" when searches are being conducted for responsive records. Being able to eliminate these types of materials during the initial search reduces the time and effort needed locate responsive agency records and reduces agency response time.

   In 2024, the Department continued its successful pilot program that used machine learning to assist in the declassification reviews of electronic cable records from 1999. The Department will continue releasing these declassification cables as part of its "release to one, release to all" policy.

The Department continues to explore the application of this model to records in addition to Department cables. The Department is also exploring the use of machine learning and other forms of artificial intelligence to identify similar FOIA requests, conduct searches of the Department's centralized databases for potentially responsive records, and improve the public website including customer experience for site visitors. These efforts remain in pilot stages.

4. OIP issued guidance in 2017 encouraging agencies to regularly review their FOIA websites to ensure that they contain essential resources and are informative and user-friendly. Has your agency reviewed its FOIA website(s) during the reporting period to ensure it addresses the elements noted in the guidance?

   Yes

5. Did all four of your agency's quarterly reports for Fiscal Year 2024 appear on FOIA.gov?

   Yes

6. If your agency did not successfully post all quarterly reports on FOIA.gov, please explain why and provide your agency's plan for ensuring that such reporting is successful in Fiscal Year 2025.

   N/A

7. The FOIA Improvement Act of 2016 requires all agencies to post the raw statistical data used to compile their Annual FOIA Reports. Please provide the link to this posting for your agency's Fiscal Year 2023 Annual FOIA Report and, if available, for your agency's Fiscal Year 2024 Annual FOIA Report.

   https://foia.state.gov/FOIALIBRARY/Reports2.aspx

8. In February 2019, DOJ and OMB issued joint Guidance establishing interoperability standards to receive requests from the National FOIA Portal on FOIA.gov. Are all components of your agency in compliance with the guidance?

   No, not all Department components are in compliance with the guidance. The Department's central FOIA office, the Information Access Programs Directorate, became interoperable with FOIA.gov on May 26, 2023; however, the Office of Inspector General is not yet interoperable in line with the guidance.

9. Optional -- Please describe the best practices used in greater utilizing technology and any challenges your agency faces in this area.

There have been major improvements in the Department's management of electronic records in a centralized, cloud-based eRecords archive that is interoperable with FOIAXpress. FOIAXpress allows one platform to complete all aspects of the FOIA process electronically, including searching for records previously provided in response to FOIA requests contained in its document storage component.

As described above, in 2024, the Department continued implementation of its successful pilot program that used a machine learning model to assist in the declassification reviews of electronic cable records from 1999.

The Department continues to explore the application of this model to records in addition to Department cables. The Department initiated two pilot projects to explore whether machine learning and AI can be used to identify similar FOIA requests, conduct searches of the Department's centralized databases for potentially responsive records, and improve the public website including customer experience for site visitors.

Section V: Steps Taken to Remove Barriers to Access, Improve Timeliness in Responding to Requests, and Reduce Backlogs

The Attorney General's 2022 FOIA Guidelines instruct agencies "to remove barriers to requesting and accessing government records and to reduce FOIA processing backlogs." Please answer the following questions to describe how your agency is removing barriers to access, improving timeliness in responding to requests, and reducing FOIA backlogs.

A. Remove Barriers to Access

1. Has your agency established alternative means of access to first-party requested records, outside of the typical FOIA or Privacy Act process?

   Yes

2. If yes, please provide examples. If no, please indicate why not. Please also indicate if you do not know.

   The Department receives first-party requests on various subjects. Certain requests that seek access to personnel-related records, including medical files, can be processed without the need to submit a FOIA request.

3. Please describe any other steps your agency has taken to remove barriers to accessing government information.

   The Department implemented the statutory requirement to accept remote identity proofing and authentication to allow an individual to request access to their records or to provide

prior written consent authorizing disclosure of their records under the Privacy Act. The Department went live with its two updated DS-4240 certification of identity forms that permit the use of electronic signatures on August 18, 2022. The forms are available on the [Department's Request Records](#) webpage and on the [About Us](#) page.

On May 26, 2023, the Department went live with the Public Access Link, its online web portal where requesters can create an account to electronically submit FOIA or Privacy Act request, check the status of a request, access records, and communicate with the Department.

The Department also updated all relevant portions of its FOIA website that pertain to obtaining access to records with forms and instructions on how to submit requests electronically.

B. Timeliness

4. For Fiscal Year 2024, what was the average number of days your agency reported for adjudicating requests for expedited processing? Please see Section VIII.A. of your agency's Fiscal Year 2024 Annual FOIA Report.

   31.5

5. If your agency's average number of days to adjudicate requests for expedited processing was above ten calendar days, according to Section VIII.A. of your agency's Fiscal Year 2024 Annual FOIA Report, please describe the steps your agency will take to ensure that requests for expedited processing are adjudicated within ten calendar days or less.

   The office that adjudicates these requests faced staffing resource challenges. That office is now staffed accordingly to meet the demands of adjudicating expedited requests.

6. Does your agency utilize a separate track for simple requests?

   Yes

7. If your agency uses a separate track for simple requests, according to Annual FOIA Report section VII.A, was the agency overall average number of days to process simple requests twenty working days or fewer in Fiscal Year 2024?

   Yes

8. If not, did the simple track average processing time decrease compared to the previous Fiscal Year?

   N/A

9. Please provide the percentage of requests processed by your agency in Fiscal Year 2024 that were placed in your simple track. Please use the following calculation based on the data from your Annual FOIA Report: (processed simple requests from Section VII.C.1) divided by (requests processed from Section V.A.) x 100.

8.25%

10. If your agency does not track simple requests separately, was the average number of days to process all non-expedited requests twenty working days or fewer?

N/A

C. Backlogs

Backlogged Requests

11. If your agency had a backlog of requests at the close of Fiscal Year 2024, according to Annual FOIA Report Section XII.D.2, did that backlog decrease as compared with the backlog reported at the end of Fiscal Year 2023?

Yes

12. If not, according to Annual FOIA Report Section XII.D.1, did your agency process more requests during Fiscal Year 2024 than it did during Fiscal Year 2023?

N/A

13. If your agency's request backlog increased during Fiscal Year 2024, please explain why and describe the causes that contributed to your agency not being able to reduce its backlog. When doing so, please also indicate if any of the following were contributing factors:
   • An increase in the number of incoming requests
   • A loss of staff
   • An increase in the complexity of the requests received (if possible, please provide examples or briefly describe the types of complex requests contributing to your backlog increase)
   • Litigation
   • Any other reasons – please briefly describe or provide examples when possible

N/A

14. If you had a request backlog, please report the percentage of requests that make up the backlog out of the total number of requests received by your agency in Fiscal Year 2024. Please use the following calculation based on data from your Annual FOIA Report:

(backlogged requests from Section XII.A) divided by (requests received from Section V.A) x 100. This number can be greater than 100%. If your agency has no request backlog, please answer with "N/A."

96.9%

Backlogged Appeals

15. If your agency had a backlog of appeals at the close of Fiscal Year 2024, according to Section XII.E.2 of the Annual FOIA Report, did that backlog decrease as compared with the backlog reported at the end of Fiscal Year 2023?

    Yes

16. If not, according to section XII.E.1 of the Annual FOIA Report, did your agency process more appeals during Fiscal Year 2024 than it did during Fiscal Year 2023?

    N/A

17. If your agency's appeal backlog increased during Fiscal Year 2024, please explain why and describe the causes that contributed to your agency not being able to reduce its backlog. When doing so, please also indicate if any of the following were contributing factors:
    • An increase in the number of incoming appeals
    • A loss of staff
    • An increase in the complexity of the requests received (if possible, please provide examples or briefly describe the types of complex requests contributing to your backlog increase)
    • Litigation
    • Any other reasons – please briefly describe or provide examples when possible

    N/A

18. If you had an appeal backlog please report the percentage of appeals that make up the backlog out of the total number of appeals received by your agency in Fiscal Year 2024. Please use the following calculation based on data from your Annual FOIA Report: (backlogged appeals from Section XII.A) divided by (appeals received from Section VI.A) x 100. This number can be greater than 100%. If your agency did not receive any appeals in Fiscal Year 2024 and/or has no appeal backlog, please answer with "N/A."

    19.87%

D. Backlog Reduction Plans

19. In the 2024 guidelines for Chief FOIA Officer Reports, any agency with a backlog of over 1000 requests in Fiscal Year 2023 was asked to provide a plan for achieving backlog reduction in the year ahead. Did your agency implement a backlog reduction plan last year? If so, describe your agency's efforts in implementing this plan and note if your agency was able to achieve backlog reduction in Fiscal Year 2024?

    Yes. The Department continues to follow its previously developed backlog reduction plan and update and revise its FOIA policies and procedures to improve its FOIA program. In FY 2024, the Department determined its current backlog reduction plan should be modified to account for updated data on incoming requests, processing rates, current resources, and best practices issued by the DOJ's Office of Information Policy. The plan is being revised and will be updated in FY 2025.

    In 2024, the Department continued to fill key FOIA and FOIA litigation vacancies and also hired new contract employees to process FOIA requests.

    The Department also took additional actions to increase its case closure rate, including increased communication with requesters regarding the scope of their requests, proactively releasing records to the public ("release to one, release to all" policy) to reduce the number of FOIA requests received, grouping similar requests, additional training of its FOIA staff, realigning of FOIA staff into teams, prioritizing the closure of the oldest requests, and exploring the use of new technology (including AI and machine learning) to manage and process requests.

20. If your agency had a backlog of more than 1,000 requests in Fiscal Year 2024, please explain your agency's plan to reduce this backlog during Fiscal Year 2025.

    The Department will continue to implement the steps noted above including trying new approaches to adapt to unexpected circumstances and foster innovation. It will also audit the backlog to understand the types of requests that are in its backlog and why the processing of those requests has been delayed.

E. Reducing the Age of Requests, Appeals, and Consultations

Ten Oldest Requests

21. In Fiscal Year 2024, did your agency close the ten oldest pending perfected requests that were reported in Section VII.E. of your Fiscal Year 2023 Annual FOIA Report?

    Yes

22. If no, please provide the number of these requests your agency was able to close by the end of the fiscal year, as listed in Section VII.E of your Fiscal Year 2023 Annual FOIA Report. If you had less than ten total oldest requests to close, please indicate that.

   N/A

23. Beyond work on the ten oldest requests, please describe any steps your agency took to reduce the overall age of your pending requests.

   The FOIA Office established a team to directly address the Department's oldest direct requests, oldest consultations, and other agency's oldest requests.

Ten Oldest Appeals

24. In Fiscal Year 2024, did your agency close the ten oldest appeals that were reported pending in Section VI.C.5 of your Fiscal Year 2023 Annual FOIA Report?

   No

25. If no, please provide the number of these appeals your agency was able to close by the end of the fiscal year, as listed in Section VII.C.(5) of your Fiscal Year 2023 Annual FOIA Report. If you had less than ten total oldest appeals to close, please indicate that.

   9

26. Beyond work on the ten oldest appeals, please describe any steps your agency took to reduce the overall age of your pending appeals.

   An IAP Supervisory Government Information Specialist with extensive FOIA experience working in the Bureau of Consular Affairs continued assisting with appeals and trained some employees on reviewing and redacting visa records. As nearly 70% of FOIA appeals pertain to consular matters, having an in-house subject matter expert has significantly reduced the need to consult internally. The Department is also working to establish a detail opportunity for litigation and appeals analysts to work in the Directorate for Visa Services to further expedite the processing of these types of records.

Ten Oldest Consultations

27. In Fiscal Year 2024, did your agency close the ten oldest consultations that were reported pending in Section XII.C. of your Fiscal Year 2023 Annual FOIA Report?

   Yes

28. If no, please provide the number of these consultations your agency was able to close by the end of the fiscal year, as listed in Section XII.C. of your Fiscal Year 2023 Annual FOIA Report. If you had less than ten total oldest consultations to close, please indicate that.

N/A

Additional Information Regarding Ten Oldest

29. If your agency did not close its ten oldest pending requests, appeals, or consultations, please explain why and provide a plan describing how your agency intends to close those "ten oldest" requests, appeals, and consultations during Fiscal Year 2025.

The Department was unable to close one of the ten oldest appeals as it was pending consultation with an external agency. The Department is currently working with the Intelligence Community to develop a plan to handle some of the more sensitive and classified information that tends to create a processing bottleneck for completing older appeal cases.

F. Additional Information about FOIA Processing

30. Were any requests at your agency the subject of FOIA litigation during the reporting period? If so, please describe the impact on your agency's overall FOIA request processing and backlog. If possible, please indicate:
   • The number and nature of requests subject to litigation
   • Common causes leading to litigation
   • Any other information to illustrate the impact of litigation on your overall FOIA administration

The Department's FOIA litigation demands continued to be considerable. In FY 2024, the Department was named as a defendant in 82 new FOIA litigation cases, consisting of 103 FOIA requests. The Department ended FY 2024 with approximately 220 total FOIA litigation cases involving 373 unique FOIA requests. Most litigation cases are filed against the Department for failure to respond within the statutory time limits. While FOIA requests in litigation comprise only about 1% of all FOIA requests at the Department, they demand a disproportionate share—approximately 90%—of the FOIA reviewer resources, which has contributed to the increase in the FOIA backlog.